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From: Ludwigsen, Emily
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Associated Press, CNN, Newsmax, Vox

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Associated Press (via Star Tribune)

<http://www.startribune.com/epa-colorado-mine-waste-spill-larger-than-first-reported/321229111/>

Navajo Nation cites emergency after Colorado mine spill dumps massive contamination into river

Ivan Moreno

August 10, 2:30 PM

DENVER — Tribal officials with the Navajo Nation declared an emergency as a massive plume of contaminated wastewater from an abandoned Colorado mine flowed down the San Juan River on Monday toward Lake Powell in Utah, which supplies much of the water to the Southwest.

Some drinking water systems on the Navajo Nation, which spans parts of New Mexico, Arizona and Utah, have shut down their intake systems and stopped diverting water from the river.

Drinking water is being hauled to some communities.

Navajo President Russell Begaye said the tribe is frustrated with U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and he plans to take legal action. An EPA-supervised crew has been blamed for causing the spill while attempting to clean up the mine area.

Elsewhere, farms along the Animas and San Juan river valleys in northwestern New Mexico have no water to irrigate their crops after the spill.

The yellow plume of wastewater stretches 100 miles and was three times larger than initially estimated, federal officials say. The EPA initially estimated 1 million gallons escaped.

The water is laced with heavy metals, including lead and arsenic, and spilled from the Gold King Mine in the historic town of Silverton, turning the Animas River in Colorado a mustard yellow last week.

The spill reached the New Mexico municipalities of Aztec, Farmington and Kirtland over the weekend.

The EPA has so far been unable to determine whether humans or aquatic life face health risks from the pollution.

The Navajo Nation in its declaration stated the toxic spill will have long-lasting and unknown impacts on the tribe's water system and wells.

No drinking-water contamination has been reported because water utilities shut down their intake valves ahead of the plume to keep it out of their systems. Farmers also closed the gates on their irrigation ditches to protect their crops.

Colorado authorities said Monday there were no reports yet of harm to wildlife in that state.

The state's Parks and Wildlife agency said it had inserted cages with more than 100 fingerling trout into the river in southwest Colorado near Durango.

The fish are sensitive to changes in water quality. As of Monday, only one fish had died, but the agency said it didn't know if that was because of the metals in the water.

The sludge moved so quickly that it would not have caused significant health effects to animals that consumed the water, EPA toxicologist Deborah McKean said.

The leading edge of the plume was headed toward Utah and Montezuma Creek near the town of Bluff, a tourist destination. The town, which is populated by a few hundred people, is surrounded by scenic sandstone bluffs.

Local officials prepared to shut down two wells near Montezuma Creek, said Rex Kontz, deputy general manager for the Navajo Tribal Utility Authority.

To keep water flowing to homes, the residential tank in Halchita has been filled with clean water that was hauled 40 miles from Arizona.

In Colorado, the EPA planned to meet with residents of Durango, downstream from the mine as water tests from near the city were being analyzed.

Federal officials have not said how long cleanup efforts will take.

The mine has been inactive since 1923.

A family farm that serves as many as 3,000 customers in the Four Corners region has been forced to stop irrigating dozens of acres.

D'rese Sutherland of Sutherland Farmers in Cedar Hill, New Mexico, said she received advanced warning from farmer friends in Colorado about the approaching plume.

Trucking companies that work with the region's oil and gas industry have offered to haul water to the farm, but Sutherland said it would require a significant amount to keep the chile, pumpkins and other vegetables watered.

There was no indication of when the water will be safe to use again, she said.

Members of New Mexico's congressional delegation sent a letter to EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy, expressing concern over the failure of the agency to notify New Mexico sooner.

They also asked that the agency develop a plan for dealing with the lack of water for communities in San Juan County and the Navajo Nation.

"We have yet to be presented with a comprehensive plan from the agency to provide water to those whose wells have been affected, farmers whose crops are not being irrigated, ranchers whose livestock are without water, and people for drinking, cooking, and showering," the letter stated.

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CNN

<http://www.cnn.com/2015/08/10/us/colorado-epa-mine-river-spill/>

Pollution flowing faster than facts in EPA spill

Mariano Castillo

August 10, 3:34 PM

(CNN) The mustard hue of the Animas River in Colorado -- the most visible effect of a mistake by the Environmental Protection Agency that dumped millions of gallons of pollutants into the water -- is striking.

Just a glance at a photo of the orange-yellowish slush is enough to know that something seems wrong. Scientists will have to say just how wrong, and possibly dangerous, the contamination is, though five days after the spill answers are few.

Just how polluted is the river? Is drinking water in peril? Are businesses dependent on the river out of luck?

One question that has been answered is the size of the spill: more than triple than originally estimated.

The U.S. Geological Survey reported the size of the spill to be more than 3 million gallons, compared with the initial EPA estimate of 1 million gallons.

The EPA, which caused the accidental release of the contaminants Wednesday, said it continues to monitor the river.

"Collection, transportation and lab analysis of metals in water is complex and time-consuming," the agency said in a statement.

Cities in New Mexico are also at risk as the pollution flows from the Animas River into the San Juan River.

A flyover with a specialized aircraft showed that the conditions on the Animas and San Juan rivers between Durango, Colorado, and Farmington, New Mexico, have improved, the EPA said.

According to the EPA, the spill occurred when one of its teams was using heavy equipment to enter the Gold King Mine, a suspended mine near Durango. Instead of entering the mine and beginning the process of pumping and treating the contaminated water inside as planned, the team accidentally caused it to flow into the nearby Animas River.

Officials said they believe the spill carried heavy metals -- mainly iron, zinc and copper -- from the mine into a creek that feeds into the Animas.

Wednesday's spill caused a spike in concentrations of total and dissolved metals in the water, the EPA said.

"These concentrations began to return toward pre-event conditions" by Thursday, the agency said, adding that the results of additional tests carried out over the weekend will show whether that trend continues.

The EPA has collected water samples from nine locations along the San Juan River where there are water intake plants.

"This is a really devastating spill," said Kim Stevens, director of the advocacy group Environment

Colorado. "We've been hearing from rafting companies and other businesses that rely on the river that if they can't get clients out on the river in the next couple of days, they may have to shut down their doors."

The rivers' ecosystems are also at risk, she said.

"The fish population is especially very sensitive to water contamination, and we really won't be able to see what the impacts are until all of the pollution has run its course. Time will tell what the true impacts are," she said.

The city of Durango and La Plata County, Colorado, have declared a state of emergency because of the spill.

The EPA and the New Mexico Environment Department said they will test private domestic wells near the Animas to identify metals of concern from the spill.

Tests on public drinking water systems are conducted separately by the state environment department, the agencies said.

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Newsmax

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<http://www.newsmax.com/US/colorado-mine-EPA-waste-spill/2015/08/10/id/669356/>

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Colorado EPA Mine Waste Spill Turns Animas River Orange

Courtney Coren

August 10, 12:06 PM

A state of emergency has been declared in Southern Colorado after mine waste was accidentally released into the Animas River by a federal cleanup crew, turning the river orange.

The Environmental Protection Agency has been working on cleaning up waste at the Gold King Mine, near Durango, Colorado in La Plata County, when a plug was accidentally knocked out of place with heavy equipment the EPA was using last Wednesday, CNN is reporting.

As a result, officials believe that about 3 million gallons of waste spilled out into the Animas River, USA Today reports. It was originally believed that the spill included 1 million gallons of waste, which included heavy metals such as iron, zinc and copper. Local residents were told by the EPA to avoid the river.

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According to USA Today, 500 gallons of waste continue to be discharged per minute, an EPA official said.

The EPA is also reporting that arsenic levels in the Animas River in the Durango area reached 300 times the normal level and that lead was at 3,500 times the normal level. However, those levels have dropped as the waste has moved out of the area.

EPA official Deborah McKean said that "it's not just a matter of toxicity of the chemicals, it's a matter of exposure."

La Plata County Manager Joe Kerby explained that the decision to declare a state of emergency in the area was done "due to the serious nature of the incident and to convey the grave concerns that local elected officials have to ensure that all appropriate levels of state and federal resources are brought to bear to assist our community not only in actively managing this tragic incident but also to recover from it."

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The orange water then headed for the Colorado, New Mexico border where the Animas River meets the San Juan River. USA Today is reporting that restrictions are also in place in New Mexico, along the river.

New Mexico Gov. Susana Martinez toured the damage and told a CNN affiliate that "the magnitude of it, you can't even describe it."

She also blasted the EPA for not notifying state officials sooner, saying she first heard about it from the Southern Ute Tribe. The EPA contacted New Mexico almost 24 hours after the spill occurred.

"It's completely irresponsible for the EPA not to have informed New Mexico immediately," she said.

Federal and state officials are testing private domestic wells as well as public drinking water systems.

Paul Huter of the Free Patriot Post called the accident "an example of government overreach into an area that it has no business doing business in," adding that "when the government steps in, this is what happens — matters are made much worse."

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Vox

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<http://www.vox.com/2015/8/10/9126853/epa-mine-spill-animas>

How the EPA managed to spill 3 million gallons of mining waste into a Colorado river

Brad Plumer

August 10, 12:30PM

Back in June, the Environmental Protection Agency had begun work to plug the abandoned Red and Bonita mine near Silverton, Colorado, that had been draining toxic heavy metals into the Animas River for years.

Then everything went horribly, horribly wrong.

On August 4, EPA workers were clearing out the nearby Gold King mine, closed since 1923, when they breached a debris dam that had been holding back a massive amount of water laced with arsenic, lead, and other toxins.

All that contaminated water gushed out, unstoppably, coursing down the mountains and turning the Animas River a sickening shade of yellow:

Over a million gallons of mine wastewater has made it's way into the Animas River.

At first, the EPA said that about 1 million gallons of wastewater had been released. Then, on an August 9 press call, officials said they'd taken fresh measurements and actually 3 million gallons had spilled out — about five Olympic-size swimming pools' worth.

Officials have warned people in the region to avoid contact with the river as the contaminated water surges through. The EPA is also warning people with wells in nearby floodplains to have their water tested before drinking or bathing. Both the nearby city of Durango and La Plata County in Colorado have declared states of emergencies, as has the Navajo Nation Commission on Emergency Management.

This whole disaster raises a couple of big questions: Why was the EPA messing around with abandoned mines in this area? And how did the agency manage to trigger such a massive spill? To understand this story, we have to walk back through the legacy of mining in Colorado, which is still creating grisly environmental problems to this day.

Colorado has hundreds of old mines still leaking toxins

Starting in the 1870s, miners have rushed to the Silverton region to seek out gold, silver, and other valuable resources. But as Stephanie Ogburn at KUNC and Jonathan Thompson at High Country News recount in excellent pieces, that mining boom left behind a serious mess.

There were two major environmental problems associated with mining. First, up until the 1930s or so, miners often just dumped their tailings — waste material that frequently contained toxic heavy metals — into nearby streams and rivers. Around Silverton, heavy metals accumulated in the riverbeds of the Upper Animas River, and their effects lingered for decades. For many years, fish couldn't survive in these waters.

Second, as miners dug and blasted shafts, they'd typically hit groundwater, which would begin flowing through fractures in the rock. As that water mixed with air and sulfides, it would react to form sulfuric acid. That acidic wash, in turn, dissolved and picked up various heavy metals in the ground — like zinc, arsenic, lead, and copper. These toxic streams of water are known as "acid mine drainage," and they're still a problem to this day, flowing out of mines and into nearby streams.

The last mine near Silverton closed in 1991. But there are still more than 400 abandoned mines in the region, and many continue to fill up with toxin-laced water that then leaches out into rivers and streams. And cleaning up these old mines has been a gruesome challenge for decades.

The state has struggled to clean up these old mines — and EPA recently stepped in

Water flows into pits of mine wastewater below the Gold King Mine

Water flows into pits of mine wastewater below the Gold King Mine on August 7, 2015 along Animas River. (Photo By Brent Lewis/The Denver Post via Getty Images)

That brings us to the Red and Bonita and Gold King mines that the EPA was working on. These, too, have a tangled history.

In 1991, Sunnyside Gold Corp. closed its last big mine in the region, American Tunnel. After long negotiations with the state, Sunnyside began cleanup efforts and eventually plugged American Tunnel in three places to prevent further acid mine drainage.

Unfortunately, the water in the mines then backed up, and in 2006, acid drainage began leaking out of the nearby Red and Bonita mines, which had long been abandoned. The company that had taken ownership of these mines in the meantime, Gold King, soon ran into financial difficulties and could no longer treat the water that was pouring into the Upper Animas River. After a brief period when fish had returned to the river, it was poisoned yet again.

Now enter the EPA. Ever since the 1980s, the agency has wanted to declare parts of the Silverton region a Superfund site, which would trigger federal funds for intensive cleanup efforts. But local residents have long resisted this move, out of concern that the bad publicity would drive away tourists.

So instead, the EPA has been taking a more piecemeal approach — working with the state and the Animas River Stakeholder Group to clean up mines in the region bit by bit. That meant removing waste from both the Red and Bonita and nearby Gold King mines, diverting water that was entering those mines, and eventually plugging their openings with concrete bulkheads. The cost? Some \$1.5 million.

It's worth noting that even this cleanup measure was always considered highly uncertain. EPA workers didn't know if the acid mine discharge would eventually back out and flow somewhere else. "This, in a way, is as much as experiment as the American Tunnel," Steve Fearn, co-coordinator of the Animas River Stakeholders Group, told the Durango Herald in June.

The cleanup efforts went horribly awry in August

Residents sit on the edge of the river while awaiting a glimpse of the mine wastewater.

The EPA began cleanup work in late June 2015. On August 4, workers were clearing out the partially collapsed Gold King mine when they breached a debris dam that had been holding back toxic water, filled with contaminants. That water flowed out, and the Animas River was suddenly flooded yet again by a gusher of heavy metals.

Some notes here: First, the river was hardly pristine before this incident, and it's unclear how much additional damage this blowout has actually caused. Testing by the EPA has revealed that the heavy metal contaminants became more diluted by the time the water reached the town of Durango, and early tests downstream with fish cages have revealed that the water isn't killing them all. Still, it's a worrisome situation, and the agency is scrambling to monitor things closely.

Meanwhile, this is hardly the first disastrous blowout from an old mine. Jonathan Thompson of High Country News offers some context: "In June of 1975, a huge tailings pile on the banks of the Animas River northeast of Silverton was breached, dumping tens of thousands of gallons of water, along with 50,000 tons of heavy-metal-loaded tailings into the Animas. For 100 miles downstream, the river 'looked like aluminum paint,' according to a Durango Herald reporter at the time; fish placed in a cage in the water in Durango all died within 24 hours."

Still, what's eye-catching here is that this time the EPA is at fault — not a mining company. Even though the agency was trying to clean up a toxic mess that has been simmering for decades, even though efforts to stem the flow of polluted mining water have often gone awry, even though these particular cleanup efforts were basically expected to go awry, there's an undeniable irony in the whole situation.

"It's hard being on the other side of this, in terms of being the one who caused this incident," David Ostrander, the EPA's head of emergency management, told a crowd in Durango, according to the *Guardian*. "We usually respond to emergencies, we don't cause them," he said.

The agency is currently facing criticism for failing to notify other agencies quickly enough after the spill occurred — including the state of New Mexico, where the polluted water is heading. Indeed, if a company had acted in a similar fashion, the EPA might have potentially levied fines or other penalties.

In the meantime, the polluted water is coursing down the river, eventually joining up with other waterways and making its way into New Mexico, with the long-term effects still unknown.